



Livy, *History of Rome I: A Selection*

Ideas for Further Study

Context – The Early History of Rome:

The A-Level Specification asks candidates to read Livy I, Chapters 46-52 in English. These Chapters describe the overthrow of Tarquinius Superbus' predecessor as King of Rome, Servius Tullius, and his relationship with the neighbouring Latins.

Interested readers might choose to explore further the historical context of these events, and Livy himself is a good place to begin. Book I covers the Regal period from the foundation of the city: Livy's work is literally *ab Urbe condita*. The careers of the other six Kings give an interesting context in which to see the reign of Tarquinius Superbus, and more particularly Livy's presentation of it and of the foundation of the Republic which it precipitates. Good translations are available both in print and online.

Book I

- Chapters 1-2 Aeneas and the settlement of Italy by Trojan exiles
- 3 The city of Alba Longa founded by Ascanius; its rulers
- 4-6 Romulus and Remus
- 7-16 753-716 BC: Romulus – the First King of Rome
- 17 Interregnum
- 18-21 716-672 BC: Numa Pompilius – the Second King
- 22-31 672-640 BC: Tullus Hostilius – the Third King
- 32-34 640-616 BC: Ancus Marcius – the Fourth King
- 35-41 616-578 BC: Tarquinius Priscus – the Fifth King
- 42-48 578-534 BC: Servius Tullius – the Sixth King
- 49-60 534-510 BC: Tarquinius Superbus – the Seventh and Last King of Rome

It might be worth considering where the boundary between myth and history lies – both for Livy as an author, and for us as a modern reader. Those also familiar, whether as a set text or otherwise, with Virgil's *Aeneid* may find the opening Chapters of Book I particularly worthy of attention.

Cornell's *The Beginnings of Rome* provides a detailed and interesting study of the society presented by archaeological and historical evidence for the period we are studying, and hence an opportunity to reflect on the extent to which Livy has presented a valid historical account.

**Livy's Historical Method:**

On this theme, readers really should be aware of the Preface to Book I in which Livy sets out his purpose, agenda, and understanding of historical method. While bearing in mind that they are not contemporaries, a useful comparison may be made with the opening Chapters of Tacitus' *Annals* (especially I:1-2 in which the historian lays claim to a lack of bias!) and *Histories* (especially I:1). Translations of these famous passages will be easily found online.

Morley's *Writing Ancient History* remains a good introduction to the subject of Classical Historiography – the study of how history is written. It is important for us to understand that, even if we criticise ancient historians for lacking some of the objectivity and scientific method that we would demand of their modern counterparts, they were writing within a cultural context where that approach was not only reasonable, but also valued as a literary technique.

Context – Livy and the Principate:

Livy's description of the last of the Kings – indeed his whole History – has to be seen in the context in which it was written. The events he describes at the end of Book I coloured Roman views of kingship throughout the Republican period and beyond, and yet at exactly the time in which Livy was writing, Augustus was forging a legalised form of one-man rule: the Principate.

Monarchy was a hot topic: Caesar had, famously, eschewed the crown: *non sum rex sed Caesar*, and yet the perception that he was moving too far away from Republican governmental norms played a large part in his assassination. In the breakdown of the Second Triumvirate which led to the Battle of Actium bitter accusations were made, most successfully against Antony – who lost – that he was aiming at the reestablishment of monarchy in concert with the Egyptian Queen, Cleopatra: Octavian used this powerfully in the propaganda war against him.

Yet, Octavian became Augustus, and in the First and Second Settlements (27 BC and 23 BC respectively) established the powers by which successive Roman Emperors would govern. A thorough knowledge of the events of this turbulent period of Roman history will enable the reader to understand the difficult balancing act that an historian like Livy had to undertake, and perhaps to contextualise Tacitus' criticism of earlier generations of historians.

Shotter's *Augustus Caesar* and *The Fall of the Roman Republic* are excellent and accessible introductions to the period. It may then also be interesting to look at the opening Chapters of Livy Book II in which he describes the steps taken by Brutus to establish a Republican government in Rome.